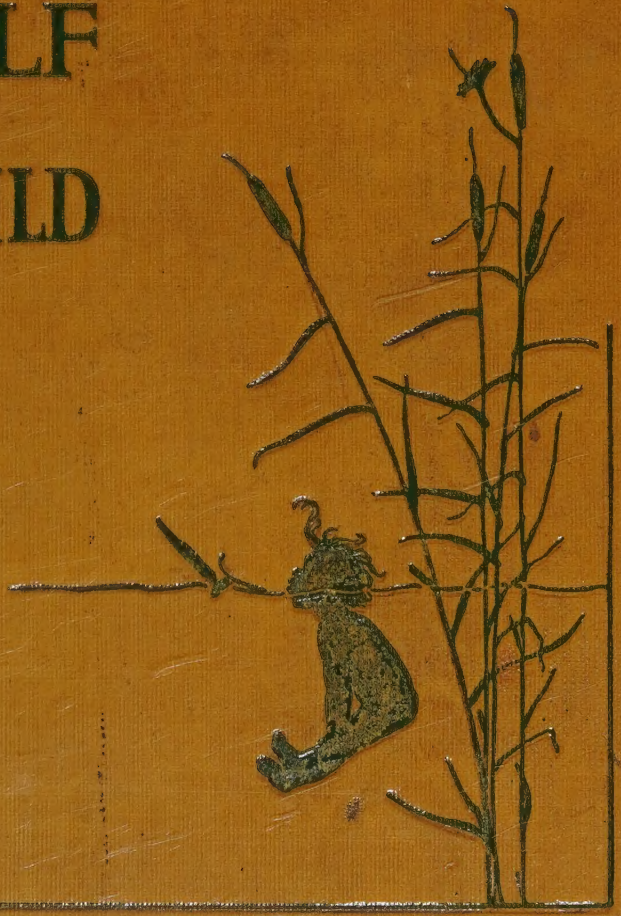
HE WATER ELF
AND
E MILLER'S CHILD



RGARET BAKER
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The Water Elf and the Miller's Child

By Margaret Baker, with pictures by Mary Baker

Duffield & Company
New York 1929

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To
our dear friend
Margaret Williams.

THE WATER ELF AND THE MILLER'S CHILD

ONCE upon a time there was a miller who lived by his lone, lorn self. In the daytime that was little matter, for then he had the splash of the water over the mill-wheel and the turning of the mill-stones to keep him company, and there were a dozen "Good morrows" to pass with those who brought corn for grinding; but when twilight fell and work was over it was lonesome indeed.

Then the miller sat at his door and watched the storks rise from the mill-pool and fly to their nest on the chimney-stack, and listened to the thrushes calling to one another from the bushes, and the swallows twittering under the eaves.

"There is not one of them lives by his lone, lorn self but I," said the miller.

Now one fine day an old woman came to the mill, and she carried a little sack.

"Good miller," said she, "will you grind my gleanings?"

"That will I readily," he said.

"I have no money to pay for your trouble, so you must dip in your measure and take toll of the corn as much as is right," said the dame.

So the miller took the sack, but when

he found how little corn it held he only lifted out a single grain to pay himself.

"A blessing on you for a careful miller," cried the old dame as she felt the weight of flour he measured out for her. "The sack seems but a grain the lighter than when I bore it here. May the wish of your heart come true for your honest dealing with a poor old body."

And because she was a Wise Woman she did not leave matters at that.

The blacksmith stood at the door of his forge and looked towards the mill.

"There is an end of the miller's luck!" quoth he. "Yonder old hag is a witch-wife—there can be no doubt of that—and if the miller was aught but a soft-hearted simpleton he would drive her away as I did myself. She will cast an evil eye on him, mark my words, and all he does will come to disaster!"

But the days went by and the mill-wheel turned as merrily, and the mill-stones ground as busily as they had ever done before. Better still, as a certain stout farmer was riding to market with his daughter behind him, a pebble caught in the horse's shoe, and that at the very mill door.

The farmer's daughter was fair and gentle, and she sat on the miller's stool while the matter of the pebble was put to rights. What could the miller do but fall in love with her, and what could she do but fall in love with the miller? And when they found they loved each other there was nothing left but to be married.

So the miller had his heart's desire and was lone and lorn no more; and in the long twilights as the Wise Woman sat by her little fire she would rub her hands and chuckle.

"Little thinks the miller that 'twas I who dropped the pebble before his door," quoth she.

Well, time went by, and every night the miller's wife sat by the miller's side, and whether they talked, or whether they kept silence they were as happy as could be. But in the daytime when the mill-wheel was turning and the miller was at his work, the miller's wife had no one to keep her company but herself.

Then she stood at her door and watched the wild ducks swim across the mill-pool with her little ones behind her, and the kingfishers flying in and out of the hole in the bank where they had their nest, and the wagtails on the stones at the water's edge teaching their brood to fly.

"There is not one that passes the day by its lone, lorn self but I," she sighed.

Now one fine day as she was busied with her baking an old woman came by, and she carried a basket full of ribbons and trinkets.

"Good daughter," said she, "will you give me one of your little brown cakes?"

"That will I good mother," said the miller's wife, and she gave the old woman

the plumpest cake of those that stood on the window-sill to cool.

"I have no money, yet I do not come begging," said the old woman. "Choose which ribbon you will and cut off as much as is right."

So the miller's wife took a knot of ribbon from the basket, but she only cut off a tiny piece.

"It seems but an inch the shorter!" cried the old dame. "May the wish of your heart come true for your kindness to a poor old body."

And because she was a Wise Woman she did not leave matters at that.

The blacksmith's wife watched the mill from her gate-way.

"There is an end of happiness for the miller's wife," cried she. "I took good care to send yonder witch-wife away faster than she came: she should not stand on my door-stone—no, not if she gave me a silver horse-shoe! But the miller's wife was always too good-natured to know her own interest—there will evil come of it: make sure of that!"

But if evil came it found nowhere to make its home, for the cakes the miller's wife took from her hearth-stone were light and crisp, and her washing white as flecks of foam. Better still, it was not long before the storks brought a tiny daughter to the miller and his wife.

So the miller's wife had her heart's desire and was lone and lorn no longer; and in the long evenings when the Wise Woman took her ease before her little fire she would rub her hands and chuckle.

"Little do they think that 'twas I who told the storks to carry a baby to the mill," quoth she.

Well, time went on, spring after winter, and autumn after summer, over and over, till the baby was a baby no longer, but a little girl, sitting on her stool to dress her doll, and climbing on her father's knee when bedtime drew near to listen to his tales.

That was happy as could be, but when she played Hide and Seek among the grain-sacks in the mill there was no one to seek if she hid, and no one to find if she went seeking; and when she ran down to the mill-pool there was no one to join in her games but herself. She would watch the fishes chasing one another in and out among the shadows of the willow-tree, and the baby rats rolling each over and over in their frolics.

"There is not one of them has to play by its lone, lorn self but I," sighed the miller's little daughter.

Now one fine day as she sat by the mill-pool making daisy-chains, who should come by but the Wise Woman?

"Good-day to you my pretty," said the old dame.

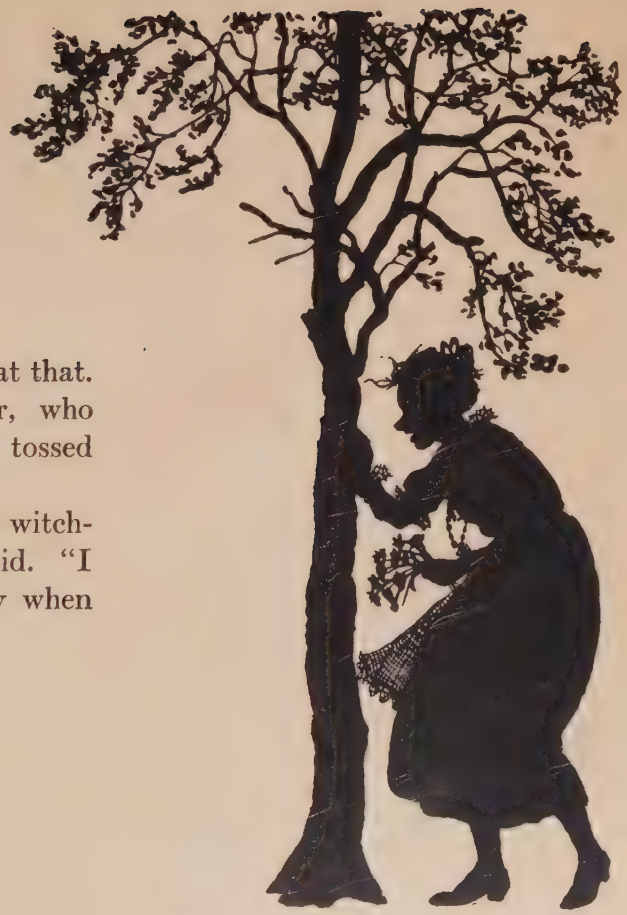
The miller's little daughter stood up to make her curtsy, and when she saw the old woman's bent shoulders and halting steps she gathered up all her flowers and ran to thrust them into her hand.

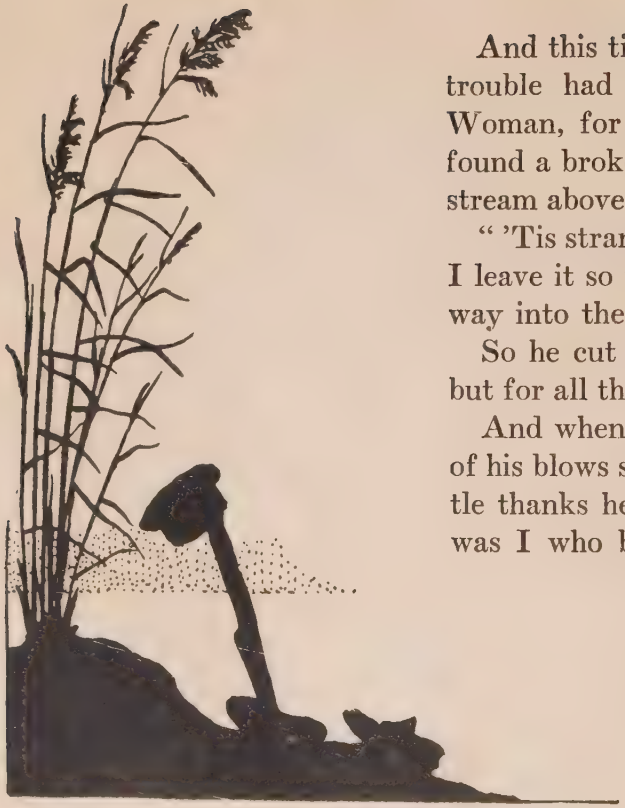
"May the wish of your heart come true for your pretty ways to a poor old body!" said the old dame.

And because she was a Wise Woman she did not leave it at that.

But the blacksmith's daughter, who was peeping behind the may-tree tossed her saucy head.

"I know better than to let an old witch-wife cast an evil eye on me!" she said. "I put out my tongue and ran away when she would have spoken to me!"





And this time, of a truth, it seemed as though trouble had come in the steps of the Wise Woman, for the very next morning the miller found a broken stake among those set across the stream above the mill.

" 'Tis strange it should break," said he, "and if I leave it so there is no telling what will find its way into the pool."

So he cut a new stake and drove it in place, but for all the haste he made he was too late.

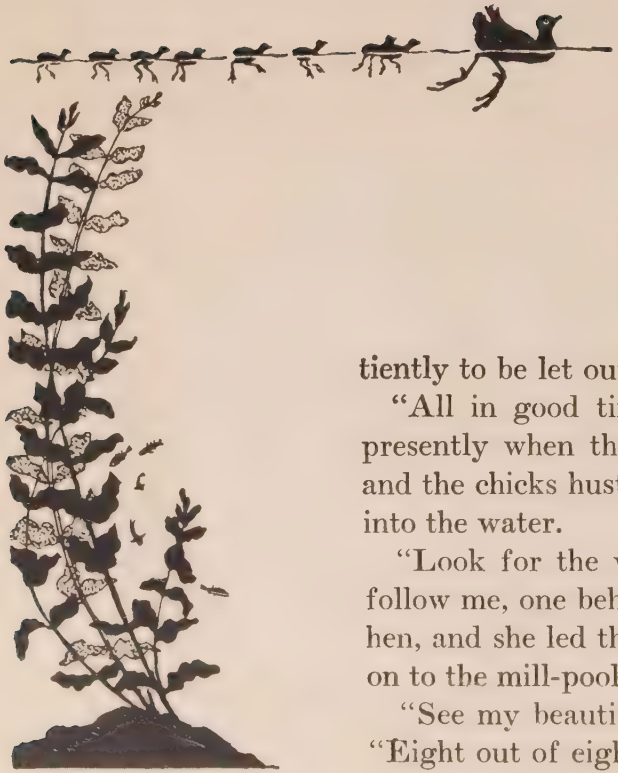
And when the Wise Woman heard the sound of his blows she nodded her wise old head. "Little thanks he would give me now if he knew it was I who broke the stake," said she, "but he will thank me before long."

"The wind is rising: see how it ripples the pool," said the miller's wife.

But it was not the wind that sent the tiny waves lapping against the banks, it was a water-elf who had wriggled through the hole left by the broken stake, and who found the mill-pool so much to his liking that he was capering in the water with glee.

The fishes swam away and hid their noses under the stones. "An elf is almost worse than an otter," they complained. "He will be chasing and teasing us all day long."

The moor-hen was too busy to notice anything that happened beyond the reeds that hid her nest, for this morning her eggs had hatched, and



eight little chicks were gathered under her wings, cheeping impatiently to be let out to see the world.

"All in good time," said the moor-hen, and presently when the sun was high she stood up and the chicks hustled each other out of the nest into the water.

"Look for the white feathers in my tail and follow me, one behind the other," said the moor-hen, and she led them through the reeds and out on to the mill-pool.

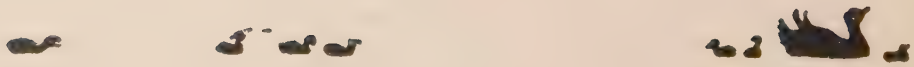
"See my beautiful family!" she said proudly. "Eight out of eight eggs—not one addled!"

"How amusing some people are!" croaked the old frog, who was sunning herself on a water-lily leaf. "Fancy counting one's eggs!"

Next moment the lily-leaf was dragged from under her and she was tumbled into the water.

"There is an elf in the pool—I'm sure there is!" she spluttered indignantly. "Nothing but an elf would treat me so rudely! I shall never dare to wink an eyelid now for fear he puts snails on my back!"

"Have you seen my brood?" the moor-hen asked the kingfisher. "They hatched this morning—eight out of eight eggs and all of them sturdy, as you can see for yourself."

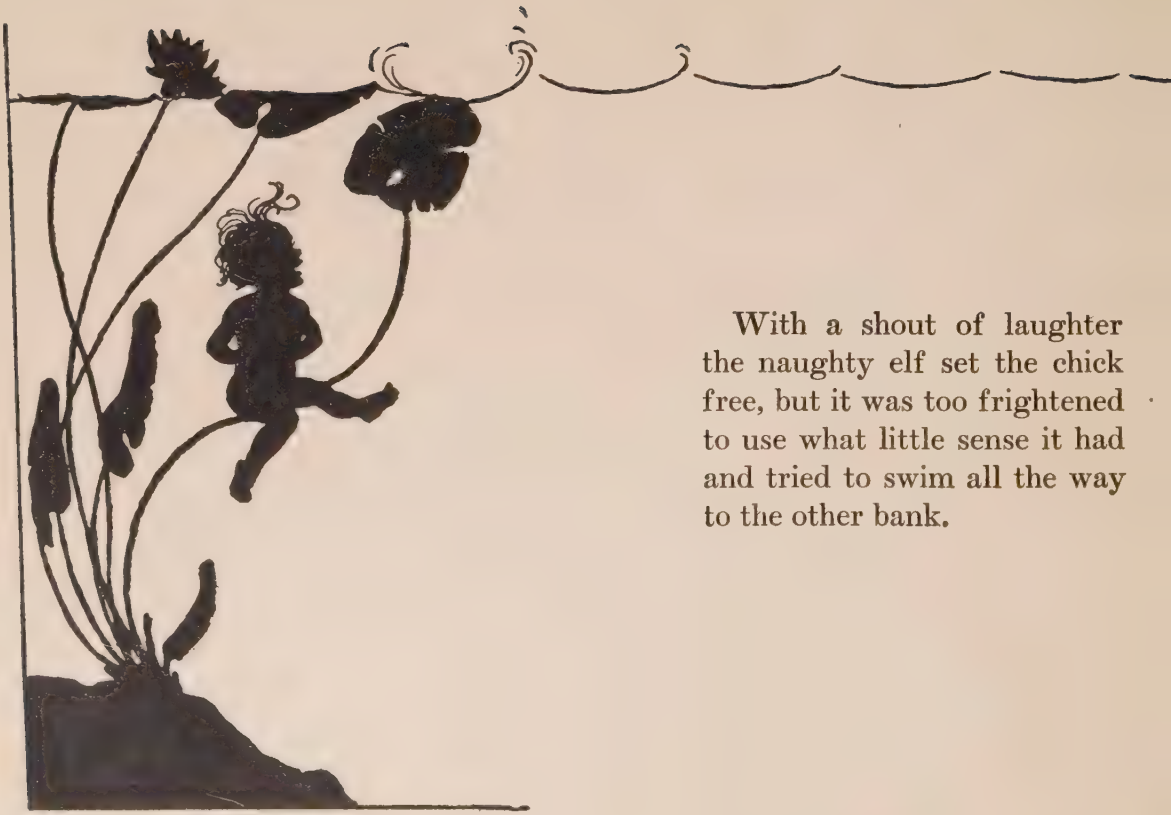


"Eight is not such a great number," said the kingfisher. "I once hatched ten, and reared them too—all but one, and he died because he tried to swallow a minnow too large for him. But you must have made a mistake: I only see seven chicks."

"Seven!" cried the moor-hen.

"Seven," said the kingfisher; "count them for yourself."

"What shall I do? What shall I do?" clucked the poor moor-hen and began to dash hither and thither in search of her little one.



With a shout of laughter the naughty elf set the chick free, but it was too frightened to use what little sense it had and tried to swim all the way to the other bank.

"How shall I ever rear eight chicks with a water-elf in the pool?" clucked the moor-hen. "I never could bear anything with webs between its fingers or toes, a water-elf least of all. I shall have to find another nesting place, and this pool suited me so well."

The stork was standing on one leg among the water-buttercups. He closed his eyes to think, and while they were shut the elf crept softly behind him and tangled the long weeds around his foot.

"Shoo!" cried the elf, and the stork wakened with a start and spread his great wings to fly away, only to find himself caught.

"It is disgraceful that such things can happen in the mill-pool!" exclaimed the stork when he had freed himself and

flown to his nest in the chimney-stack. "From the days when my great-great-grandfather nested here we have always been respected; and now to be made the sport of a water-elf with webbed hands! The very frogs will be taking liberties next!"

And the storks clappered their long bills and were very indignant.

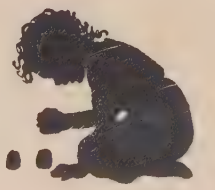
But the water-elf left the birds and fishes to their own devices when he saw the miller's little daughter come running down to the pool; he thought he had never seen anything half so pretty and he hid himself in the irises to watch.

First she stood on tip-toe to peep into the nest in the maple-tree, and then she ran down to the water's edge to sprinkle crumbs for the fishes. But scarcely a minnow ventured near, and that seemed very strange if one did not know about the water-elf.

But the miller's little daughter soon forgot her wonder. She had a cracked cup without a handle, and she began to be very busy filling it with mud, pressed well down with her plump little hands. First she made a pie for the miller and drew a pattern round it with a twig; then she made a pie for the miller's wife and put forgetmenot flowers round the top; and last she made a pie for herself and put stones in it for sugar-plums, and when it was baked in the sun she pretended to eat it and broke it into little bits and laughed.

The water-elf watched her with both his black eyes very wide open, but even watching her could not keep him from mischief, and when she looked for the cup to gather mud for a fresh baking she found it tumbled into the pool and broken in two.

So there was an end of the game and she ran back to the mill, and that was so little to the elf's liking that he forgot to laugh at his trick. He picked up the cup again and tried to make pies for himself, but the broken pieces would not hold the mud and he threw them away crossly and swam off to look for new pranks to play.

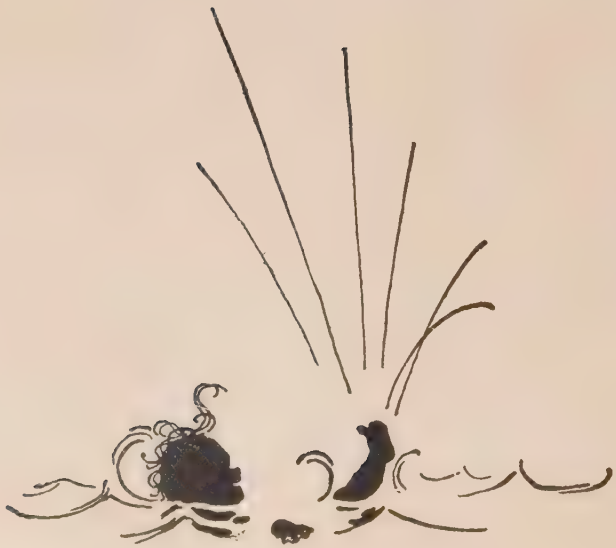


It was not long before he found what he sought. When twilight fell the blacksmith came stealing down to the water; the pool was none of his, but he had a mind to catch a fish or two, and he laughed to himself to think how tasty a supper he would get without the trouble of paying for it.

Hardly had he cast his line than the elf seized it, and pulled it and jerked it, and swam so wildly up and down that the blacksmith was soon hot and panting, and his arms ached with the struggle to keep hold of the rod.

" 'Tis a monstrous fish I have hooked!" he gasped.

Then the elf let go with a shout of glee, and the blacksmith tumbled heels over head into the mud, and there was nothing on his hook save a broken crock.



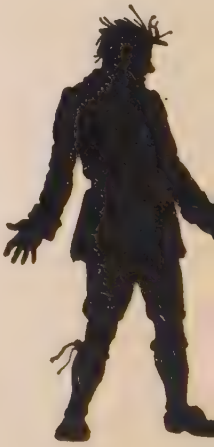
He made all haste to find the miller, but he said no word of the fish he meant to steal.

"There is a water-elf in the pool, neighbour!" he cried. "I would set the dogs on him, were I you, else he will work all sorts of harm."

"I am little likely to stop him by treating him so ill," said the miller.

"You were ever a stupid dunder-pate!" cried the blacksmith. "Did I not say that evil would come to you when you let the old witch-wife through your door?"

But whether the evil came to the miller or the blacksmith you may judge for yourself.



Next day the elf was early astir, and before the sun was high there was not a creature about the pool but had a tale to tell of his pranks. Little cared the elf as he laughed and capered, for an elf's heart is no bigger than a buttercup seed, and so he does not know any better than to tease and trouble. Yet all the while he did not forget to watch for the miller's little daughter.

She carried her doll, and all the way across the meadow she was telling it of what they would see: the kingfishers

and the dragonflies, the birds that came down to bathe and drink, and the big eel lying in the mud. But when they came to the pool it was still and silent, and that was very strange if one did not know of the elf hiding among the rushes.

The miller's little daughter soon forgot her wonder, and she began to undress the doll and wash its clothes, one by one, and lay them on the grass to dry.

The elf watched her with his eyes so wide open that it seemed as though he would never be able to shut them again, but even watching her could not keep him from

mischief and he stirred the water till the little dress was carried away.

She pulled the longest bulrush she could find, but the dress always floated a little further from the bank than she could reach and she had to go back to the mill without it, her lips trembling and her eyes full of tears.

The elf threw back his head to laugh, but he found he did not want to laugh at all, and that was a feeling he did not understand in the least. He caught the little dress and tried to put it on a piece of wood as he had seen it put on the doll, but the dress tore in his hands and he threw it away crossly and fell to looking for fresh tricks.

It was not long before he found what he sought. At twilight the blacksmith's wife came slowly across the meadow. The meadow was none of hers, but she had a mind to find a mushroom or two, and she laughed to think of the tasty supper she would get without the trouble of paying for it; and lest the miller's wife should ask her errand she carried a pail to draw water from the pool.

But scarcely had she stooped at the water-side than the elf caught the pail by the edge and splashed and wriggled to such purpose that she dropped the handle and ran screaming across the meadow.

She made all haste to the miller's wife —but she said no word of the mushrooms she meant to steal.

"There is surely an elf in the pool, neighbour!" cried she. "See how he has wetted all my gown; and, what is more, he has dragged the pail from my hands and carried it off. I would catch him and beat him, were I in your shoes, or he will do you all manner of mischief."

"Beating is little likely to cure him of ill-will," said the miller's wife.

"You were always a senseless creature!" cried the other. "Did I not say evil would come to the mill when you let the old witch-wife over your door-stone?"

But whether the evil came to the miller's wife or the blacksmith's you may think for yourself.

The storks flew away to another pool to fish, the frog hopped across the meadow to a ditch to live, and the birds went to bathe and drink in puddles by the roadside; but there was still mischief for the elf to do when dawn came next day. He plucked the snails from the lily-stems and set them afloat, he pulled the newts from their shelter by the tail, he poked the old eel lying asleep in the mud, and when the water-rats slipped out of their hole in search of food he blocked the doorway with mud and pebbles so that they could not get in again.

But when it grew near time for the miller's little daughter to come out to play he hid himself among the reeds.

Presently she ran across the meadow, and in her hand was a tiny boat with a rook's feather for a sail, shining blue and purple in the sunlight.

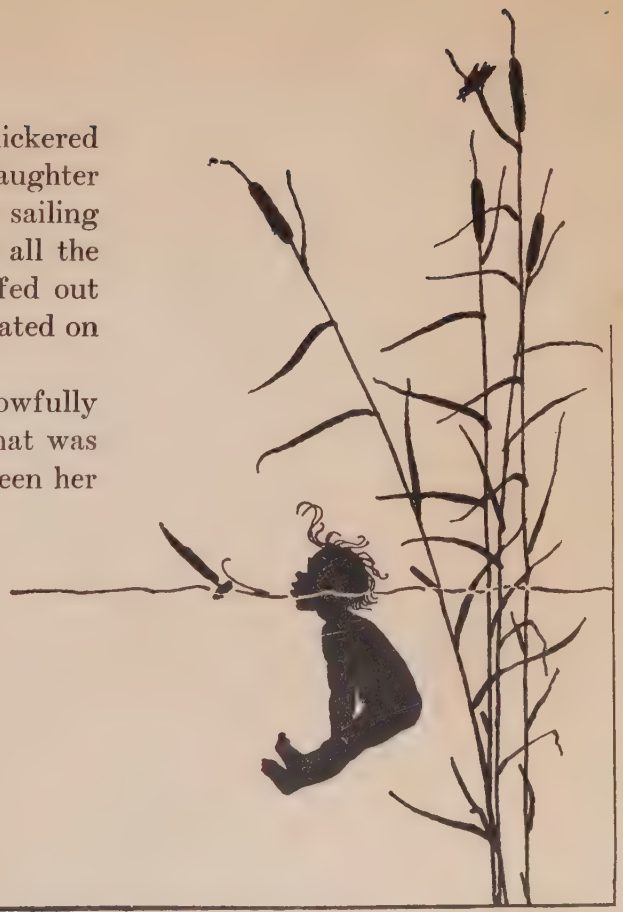
But when she came to the pool it was all so quiet and still that she did not know what to make of it. The moor-hen was crouched above

her nest, the fishes had hidden themselves among the stones, and there was no singing and twittering of birds.

But she soon forgot her wonder in setting her boat a-sail. She built it a harbour of pebbles where it could ride in safety and laughed to see it breast the waves she made. Then she gathered a cargo of grass seed and set it to longer voyages.

The feather caught the breeze that flickered over the water, and the miller's little daughter clapped her hands to see the tiny ship go sailing away. But as she sat weaving fancies of all the fine adventures it would meet, the elf puffed out his cheeks and blew the boat over, and it floated on its side into the bulrushes.

Then the miller's little daughter sat sorrowfully by the water's edge and began to cry. That was the strangest of all the things the elf had seen her do and it did not amuse him in the least.



Now who should come by but the blacksmith's daughter in her new silk gown and with her hair set in so many curls that there was not room for even one more. She came to gather a posy to tuck in her bodice, for though there were flowers in plenty in her own garden she had no mind to pluck them while she could take someone-else's forgetmenots for nothing.

"There!" cried she when she saw the miller's little daughter. "Did I not say evil would come of your talking with the old witch-wife?" And she tossed her head till all the curls danced like springs.

Then she stooped at the water's edge to pull the flowers. "Forgetmenots are the colour of my eyes," said she, "everyone will turn to look at me when I walk to the village."

But the elf had another idea than that, and he rolled the stone from under her foot and she slipped into the pool.

Such a wailing as she set up could be heard as far as the smithy itself.

"There must be an elf in the pool!" she cried. "See my shoes and stockings black with mud and my gown all wetted and torn! The spiteful creature! I would throw stones at him if he lived in my pool!"

"That would not make him good," said the miller's little daughter.

"What care I whether he is made good or not so long as I serve him as he has served me!"

"If there was an elf in the pool I should want to play with him," said the little girl. "It is so lonely to play by oneself."

"There is no use in talking to such a silly child!" cried the blacksmith's daughter, and went whimpering home to dry her clothes.

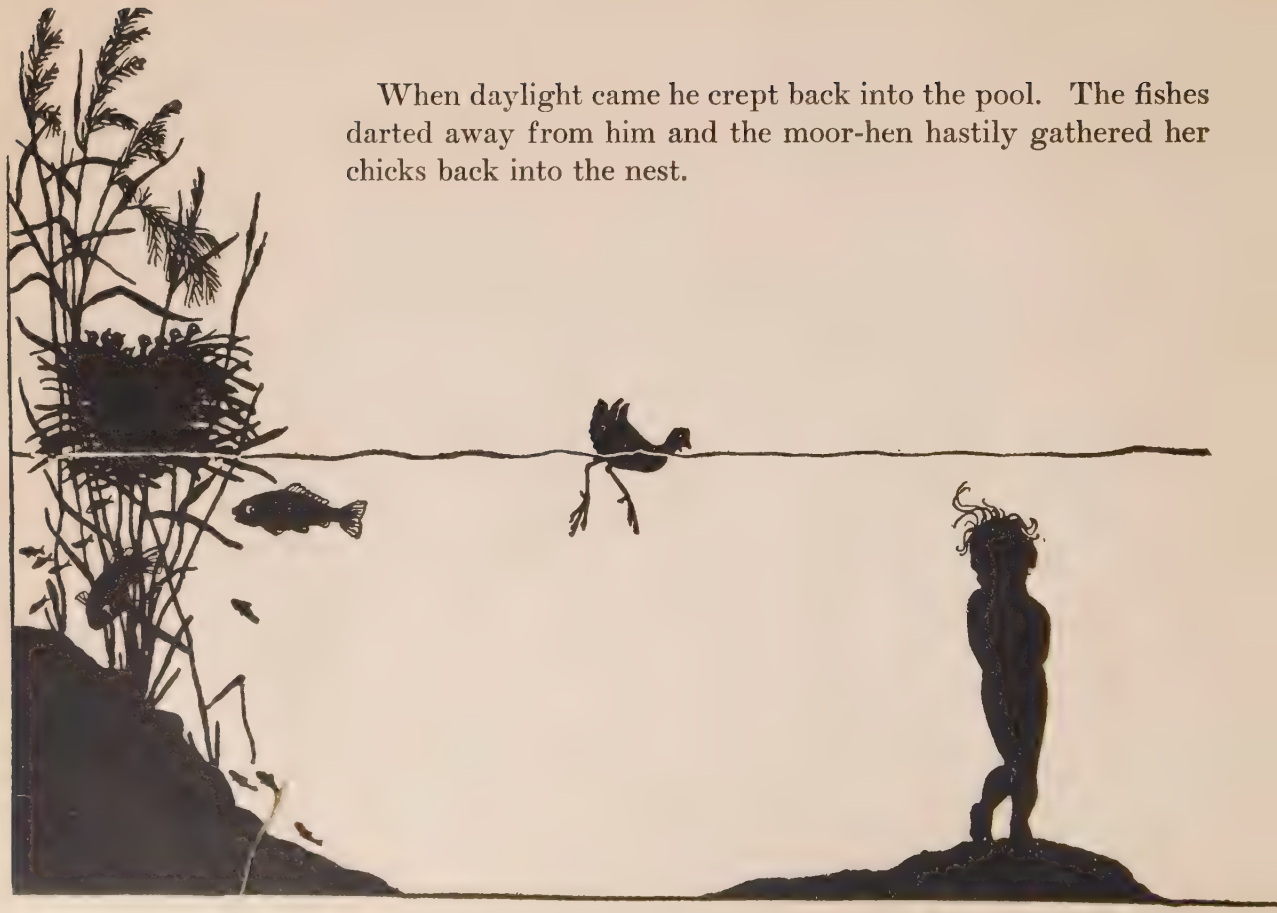
"There was never anyone who wanted to play with me before," thought the elf, and wondered greatly.

He crept very softly to where the little girl was sitting and put out his little webbed hand. He touched her hair as lightly as a butterfly's wing might have brushed it in passing, but it sent such a tingling through his fingers that he drew back in a great fright.

Presently he crept near again, but as he put out his hand to touch her cheek a tear fell on it, and all of a sudden his tiny heart seemed to swell until there was no room for it, and he tumbled back into the pool and swam away trembling with fear.

And when he looked at the hand on which the tear had fallen he found the webs between his fingers had been washed away. He rubbed his hand in the mud and opened and closed it, but for all he could do it would not come like the other one again.

All night long he hid himself among the reeds wondering and wondering at the strange things that were happening to him, and all night long he thought of the miller's little daughter.



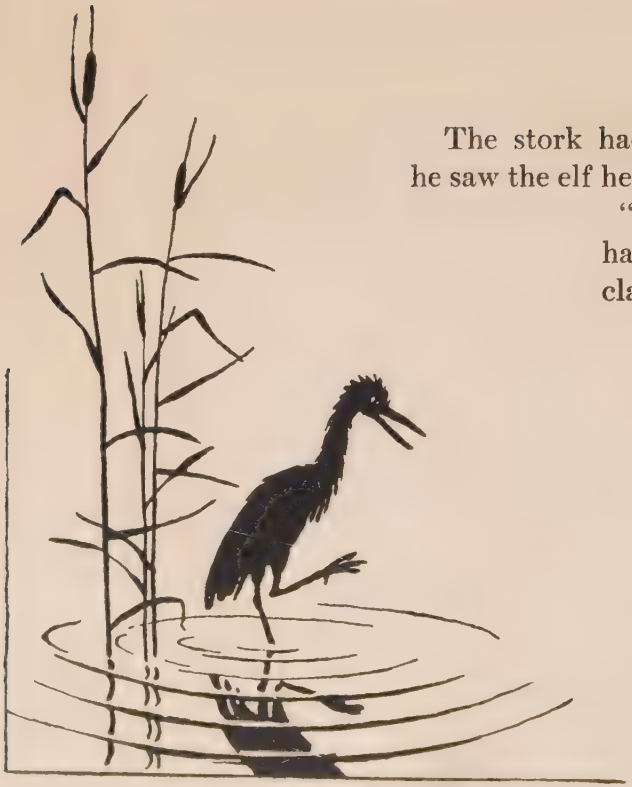
When daylight came he crept back into the pool. The fishes darted away from him and the moor-hen hastily gathered her chicks back into the nest.

"I don't mean any harm," said the elf.

"A likely story!" clucked the moor-hen, "after all the trouble you have made the last few days. Go away!"

"Let me catch you near my hole again!" snarled the water-rat. "A nice sort of game—blocking it up with mud and stones! Suppose I had been coming home in a hurry! Go away!"

"I won't do it again," said the elf. "I don't want to do things like that now; I don't know what's the matter!"



The stork had come back to the pool, but when he saw the elf he got ready to fly away again.

"Still here, you troublesome, web-handed little thing!" he exclaimed, clattering his bill crossly.

"I've only got webs on one hand now," said the elf plaintively.

"Then you're neither elf nor boy," snapped the stork; "that's worse than all! Go away!"

"They all say, 'Go away!' " sighed the little elf.

Presently as he swam round the pool he found the little boat. He untangled it from the weeds and tried to set it sailing again, but the rook's feather was broken and wet and the boat would only float on its side.

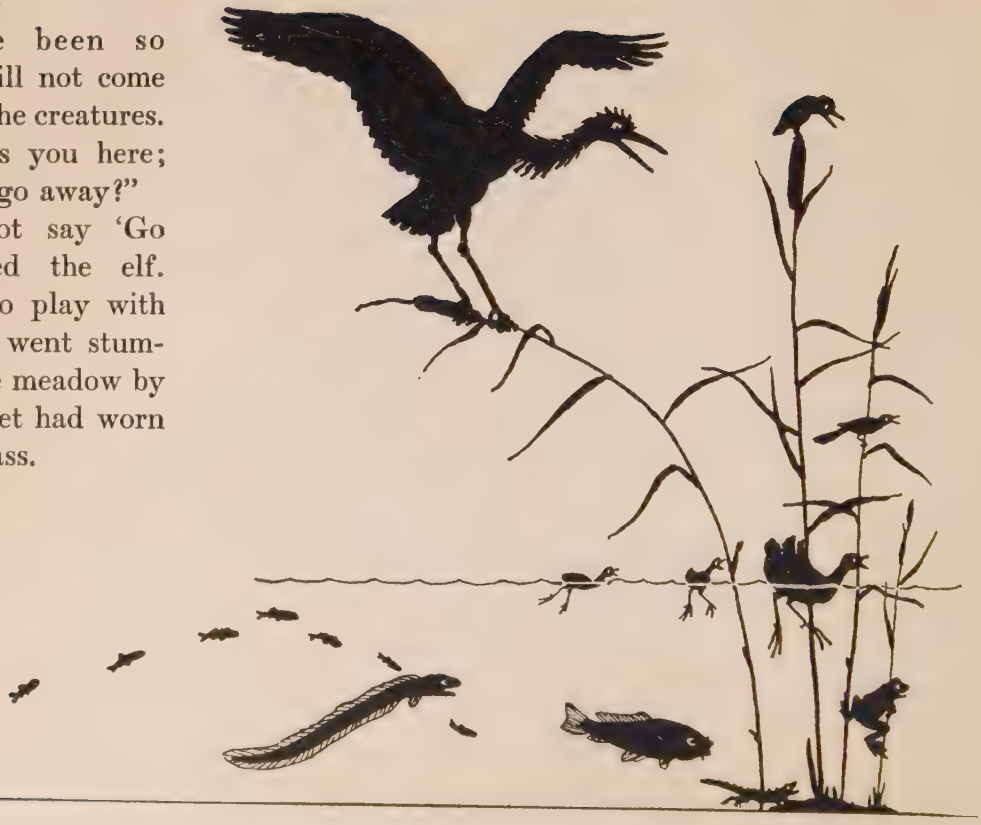
Then the elf felt his heart swelling as though it would burst, and his eyes felt so strange that he rubbed them with his knuckles, and suddenly he was crying.

"What can be the matter?" he gasped, for an elf cannot cry. And as the tears trickled through his fingers they melted away the last of the webs that clung between them.

"It is very lonely," he sobbed, "but when the miller's little daughter comes out she will play with me and I shan't be lonely any more."

"You have been so naughty she will not come back," said all the creatures. "No one wants you here; why don't you go away?"

"She did not say 'Go away!'" sobbed the elf. "She wanted to play with me!" And he went stumbling across the meadow by the path her feet had worn through the grass.



"There is someone crying!" said the miller's little daughter.

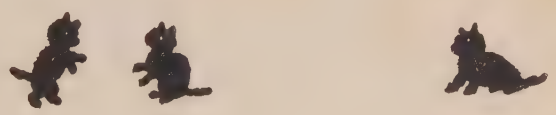
She ran to open the door, and when she saw the little elf with his tear-stained cheeks and the broken boat in his hand, she drew him in and kissed him because he was unhappy.

And with her kiss his heart grew so big that he was an elf no longer, but a little boy.

Then the miller's wife took him on her knee and comforted him, and the miller mended the little boat, and the little girl danced for joy.

"Now I have someone to play with me!" she cried.

And the elf was so happy he forgot he had ever been an elf at all.



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And that is how the miller's little daughter came to have her heart's desire, and they all lived together at the mill and were as happy as the day was long.

And if you think they forgot to share that happiness with the Wise Woman you are very much mistaken.

CHILDREN'S ROOM

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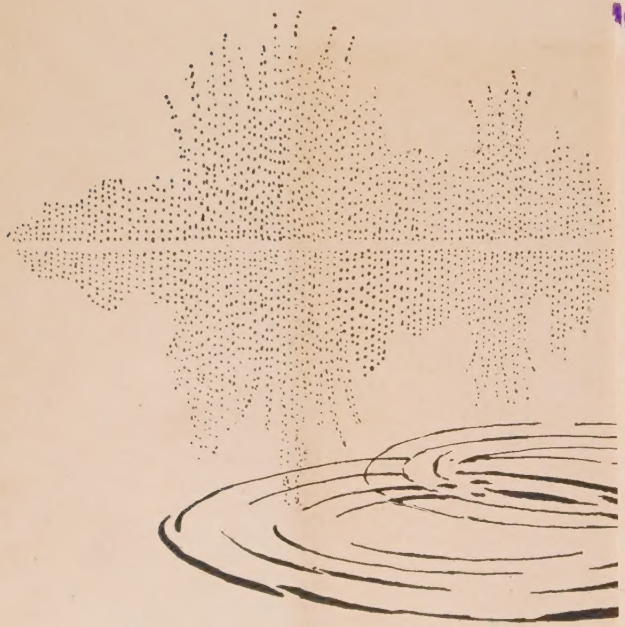

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